

VISUAL RESOURCE

Purpose

This chapter guides the appropriate placement of development so that the natural landscape continues to be the dominant view in rural parts of the county and to ensure that visual character contributes to a robust sense of place in urban areas. The County recognizes that:

- Visual resources are part of the sense of place recognized by residents;
- Intact scenic landscapes are highly valued by residents and visitors;
- A high quality visual environment and scenic views contribute to economic growth.

Introduction

San Luis Obispo County's visual resources consist of **open areas** (agricultural and natural, undeveloped land), **scenic corridors** (areas that have scenic or historic qualities that are visible from recognized roadways), and the **built environment** (urban landscape). A variety of spectacular natural features and scenic areas contribute to the quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors. Mountains and ridgelines, unique geological forms, bays and coastal views are the most obvious of these features. The county also includes many other visual resources such as open meadows, riparian corridors, wetland areas, forested areas, and open spaces. Agricultural areas also contribute to the county's visual quality. Scenic views of these resources enhance the travel experience on rural roads and highways.



Appendix 9 provides an overview of the county's scenic resources.

Relationship to Other Elements, Plans, and Programs

The policies and strategies in this chapter are consistent with other Elements of the General Plan. For example, Policies VR 1.1, 2.1 and 4.1 relate directly to Agriculture Element Policy 30. The visual resources policies also relate to other chapters in this Element, such as Open Space and Biological Resources.

The goals, policies, and implementation strategies in this chapter are applied in concert with additional goals, policies, regulations, or standards in specific planning areas as specified in the Land Use Ordinance and the Local Coastal Program. For example, some important landscapes have been identified and addressed in scenic Sensitive Resource Areas (SRA – combining designations or zoning overlays used to protect certain scenic areas) and in Highway Corridor Design Standards (HCDS). **Figure VR-1** provides a map of designated areas where scenic protection policies apply.

Coastal visual resources are addressed by the County's Local Coastal Program, specifically, the Coastal Plan Policies, the area plans, and Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance. Policies in this Element supplement the Coastal Plan Policies, except that when the policies of this Element conflict with the Coastal Plan Policies, the Coastal Plan Policies control.

Major Issues

Scenic Landscapes. Development will inevitably occur within some of the county's scenic areas. The location and design of development in these areas can have a profound effect on urban and rural landscapes. Buildings that are appropriately placed and designed buildings can complement and even blend with the natural landscape. However, inappropriately located and designed development including telecommunication facilities, roads, and billboards can detract from and conflict with an area's overall



character. Land management practices may also cause unnecessary harm to visual resources.

Community Separation. A characteristic that distinguishes San Luis Obispo County from metropolitan areas is the continued existence of rural-appearing land, called Community Separators, between separate, identifiable communities and towns. Open spaces and the rural character between communities are being lost to urban and suburban uses. As Community Separators are typically rural, many of these areas are also scenic. The *2006 San Luis Obispo County Community Separator Study* recommends ways to maintain community separation in key areas. **Figure VR-2**, a map of Community Separators, identifies the general locations where special policies should apply.

Scenic Corridors. Scenic corridors are view areas, or “viewsheds” from popular or well-traveled public roads and highways that have unique or outstanding scenic qualities. Inappropriate development or billboards can intrude upon these viewsheds. Some examples are highly visible graded roads and pads, buildings that are too close to a highway, and building designs that silhouette against the skyline, telecommunications facilities, utilities, signage, and other structures that dominate rather than blend with a natural landscape. Scenic highways and roads are scenic corridors that are designated to conserve and enhance their scenic beauty. Highway One is a designated State Scenic Highway and National Scenic Byway from San Luis Obispo to the Monterey County line. A portion of Lake Nacimiento Drive is also a designated State Scenic Highway. The County or the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) through a process that considers local needs and regulations may designate additional scenic roads and highways.

The County has adopted Highway Corridor Design Standards along Highway 101 that address residential and related development. An official scenic highway designation could result in more attention to sensitive design and promote tourism. Designating additional scenic roads and highways should not place undue restrictions on private property, or cause impacts to biological resources or unnecessary burdens on agricultural operations.

Scenic Landmarks and Views. *Visual resources are often spectacular, steep mountain ranges, the Pacific Ocean shoreline or volcanic peaks. Some outstanding features, such as peaks and coastal views, are so beautiful and dramatic that they have an iconic status as landmarks. These icons of the landscape may be miles long but only visible to the traveling public for a few seconds. Or, like Morro Rock, they may be visible to entire communities. They are especially sensitive to impairment by development. Cooperation and partnerships are essential between land owners, County government and land conservation organizations to conserve and enhance views of these resources.*



Built Environments. New development within urban areas may not reflect the historical and local design of existing buildings. This may diminish the visual identities or character of individual communities or neighborhoods. Thoughtful design can enhance the urban landscape by fitting within the context of existing development. It can also be a counterpart to the natural features that define the county. Good urban design touches on matters of architectural theme, scale, site planning, and orientation, as well as appropriate lighting, signs, and access.

Scenic Landscapes

include typical landscapes that visually define a region of the county and that are valued by residents and visitors.

Examples are the rolling, wooded hills near Templeton and the steep, grassy hills near Shandon.



Rural home blended into setting using design and vegetative screening.



Rural home dominates the setting.



FIGURE VR-1
PROTECTED SCENIC RESOURCES

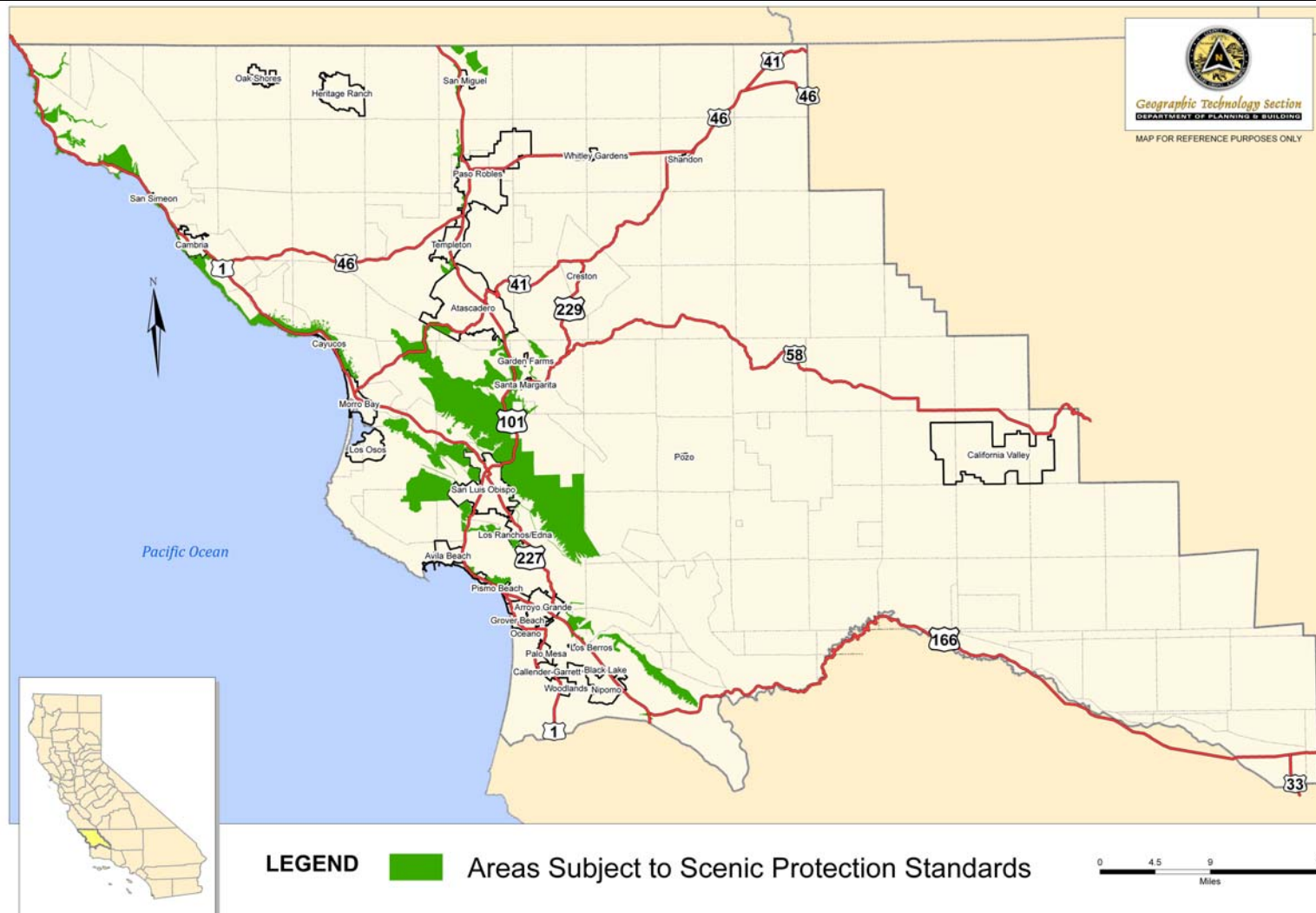
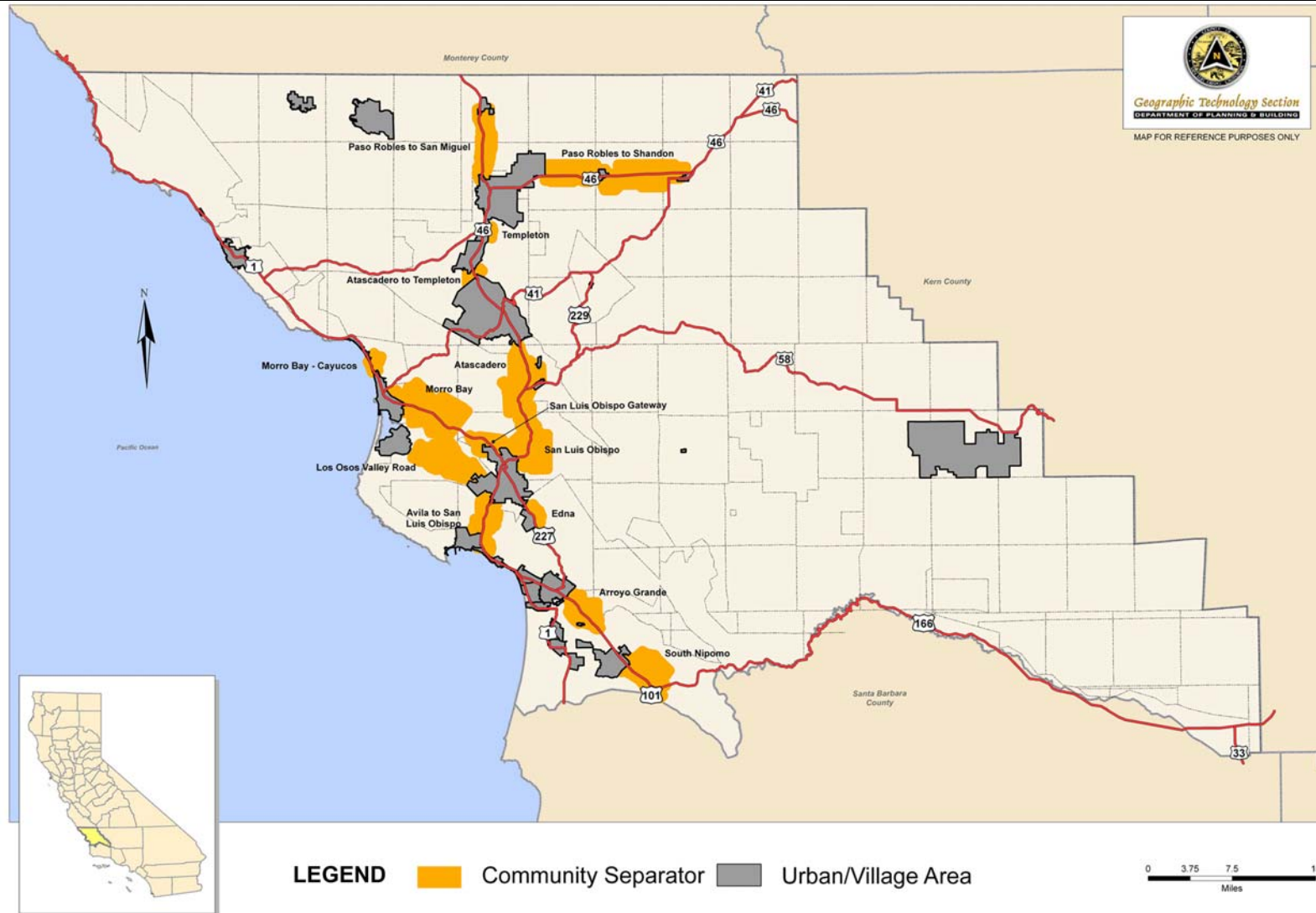


FIGURE VR-2
COMMUNITY SEPARATORS



Goals, Policies, and Implementation Strategies

The intent of the following goals, policies, and implementation strategies is to protect the visual character and identity of the county while protecting private property rights, in order to: 1) maintain a sense of place recognized by residents, 2) preserve intact scenic landscapes that are highly valued by residents and visitors, and 3) maintain a high quality visual environment that enhances tourism, real estate values and economic growth.

TABLE VR-1
GOALS FOR VISUAL RESOURCES

Goal VR 1	The natural and agricultural landscape will continue to be the dominant view in rural parts of the county.
Goal VR 2	The natural and historic character and identity of rural areas will be preserved.
Goal VR 3	The visual identities of communities will be preserved by maintaining rural separation between them.
Goal VR 4	Visual resources will be protected within scenic corridors along well-traveled highways and roads.
Goal VR 5	Views from scenic vistas and vista points will be protected.
Goal VR 6	A cohesive visual character will be maintained in urban areas.
Goal VR 7	Views of the night sky and its constellations of stars will be maintained.
Goal VR 8	Visual intrusions of signs will be minimized within public view corridors
Goal VR 9	The visual effects of utility lines will be minimized.

GOAL

1

THE NATURAL AND AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE WILL CONTINUE TO BE THE DOMINANT VIEW IN RURAL PARTS OF THE COUNTY.

Policy VR 1.1 Adopt Scenic Protection Standards

Adopt and maintain ordinance standards for development to avoid diminishing or intruding upon important scenic landmarks, views and landscapes. Adoption and implementation of scenic protection



We will recognize success when...

- *Land use strategies and standards are in place to maintain clear separations between communities and rural areas, with distinct edges around urban and village areas.*
- *Standards are in place throughout the county to assure that development protects important scenic landscapes and landmarks, and scenic viewsheds along well-traveled highways and roads, without undue restrictions on private property or agricultural operations.*
- *The visibility and clarity of the night sky in communities and rural areas is maintained, even as additional development occurs.*

standards shall not interfere with agricultural uses on private lands consistent with AGP30.

◇ ***Implementation Strategy VR 1.1.1 Identify and Designate Scenic Landmarks and Landscapes***

After extensive public participation, identify and designate scenic landscapes and important scenic landmarks that define the image of the county in order to conserve highly sensitive areas. This effort will refine and supplement the existing designated scenic areas, such as Sensitive Resource Area combining designations for visual resources, using recognized methods.

◇ ***Implementation Strategy VR 1.1.2 Amend Plans and Ordinances***

Amend the Land Use Ordinance, Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance, and/or Area Plans, as applicable to enact or revise ordinance standards to protect scenic resources, consistent with protection of agricultural uses per Agriculture Element policy AGP30. Standards for land use permits, including industrial and processing uses, and subdivisions should include visual assessments by qualified experts; visually effective setbacks near highways and roadways; siting in unobtrusive locations; and standards for height, architectural design, landscaping, lighting, and signs. The standards should emphasize avoiding visual impacts through alternative locations and designs where feasible. (VP8) Consider establishing consistent Countywide Viewshed Protection Standards.

GOAL

2

THE NATURAL AND HISTORIC CHARACTER AND IDENTITY OF RURAL AREAS WILL BE PROTECTED.

Policy VR 2.1 Develop in a manner compatible with Historical and Visual Resources

Through the review of proposed development, encourage designs that are compatible with the natural landscape and with recognized historical character, and discourage designs that are clearly out of place within rural areas. (AGP30b4 revised)



Policy VR 2.2 Site Development and Landscaping Sensitive

Through the review of proposed development, encourage designs that emphasize native vegetation and conform grading to existing natural forms. Encourage abundant native and/or drought-tolerant landscaping that screens buildings and parking lots and blends development with the natural landscape. (VP9)

Policy VR 2.3 Revise Countywide Design Guidelines

Revise and strengthen the Countywide Design Guidelines to protect rural visual and historical character. The guidelines should encourage new development that is compatible with public views of scenic areas, the natural landscape, and existing development.

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 2.3.1 Amend Countywide Design Guidelines**

Amend and strengthen the Countywide Design Guidelines to protect rural visual and historical character. The guidelines or standards should address the following: determining the visual and historical setting; using existing site features in site planning; avoiding and minimizing ridgetop development; setting back development from roads; preserving scenic features; landscaping for screening; selecting unobtrusive building materials and colors; and designing with reference to locally historical architecture.

GOAL

3

THE VISUAL IDENTITIES OF COMMUNITIES WILL BE PRESERVED BY MAINTAINING RURAL SEPARATION BETWEEN THEM.

Policy VR 3.1 Identify and Protect Community Separators

Identify Community Separators and propose land use strategies and development standards to maintain separate, identifiable cities and communities with intervening rural land. Involve landowners and communities in this process. Identification and designation of Community Separators shall not interfere with agricultural uses on private lands consistent with AGP 30.



◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 3.1.1 Community Separator: Amend the Land Use Element and Ordinance**

Amend the Land Use Element and Ordinance to identify and include Community Separators as Land Use Element Combining Designations with accompanying Land Use Ordinance development standards. Amendments will:

- a. Identify three distinct features (scenic vistas, transition areas and urban arrival areas) within each Community Separator. Mapping of Community Separators will remain conceptual until the Countywide Rural Plan is completed, and will not be parcel-specific.
- b. Establish standards for Community Separators that will retain rural land use designations and density, preserve natural features, and protect the long-term viability of agriculture.
- c. Guide development and subdivision design to avoid apparent residential density in excess of one unit per 20 acres; use visually effective setbacks near roadways and other public recreational areas; and observe height, architectural design, lighting, and sign controls.

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 3.1.2 Community Separator: Frontage Roads**

Amend the Land Use and Circulation Elements to discourage new frontage roads along highways and roadways within Community Separators.

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 3.1.3 Community Separator: TDC**

Identify Community Separators as sending sites for the Transfer of Development Credits (TDC) program and facilitate significant transfers.

Policy VR 3.2 Community Involvement

Encourage communities adjacent to Community Separators to maintain a sense of place and separation through education about the importance of separators. Community advisory groups or nonprofit organizations could lead these efforts.



Templeton - Atascadero community separation



Policy VR 3.3 Conservation Tools

Collaborate with community advisory councils, cities, and landowners to propose voluntary scenic, agricultural, or conservation easements and/or greenbelt programs that support private landownership while retaining the visual resources within Community Separators.

Policy VR 3.4 Community Edges

Maintain clear community edges for urban and village areas with appropriate plan designations when updating community and area plans. Avoid suburban or low-density sprawl at the edges of communities.

Policy VR 3.5 Annexation in Community Separators

Avoid annexation of Community Separators or their inclusion in spheres of influence for sewer and water service.

GOAL

4

VISUAL RESOURCES WILL BE PROTECTED WITHIN SCENIC CORRIDORS ALONG WELL-TRAVELED HIGHWAYS AND ROADS.

Policy VR 4.1 Designation of Scenic Corridors

Designate scenic corridors based on the recommendations for Scenic Corridor Studies, for the candidate roads and highways listed in **Table VR-2**. (AGP30a; OSP24a)

◇ *Implementation Strategy VR 4.1.1 Scenic Corridor: Work Plan*

Propose a priority list and work program for consideration by the Board of Supervisors to conduct corridor studies and designate the candidate roads and highways listed in **Table VR-2** (OSP24d). At a minimum, the corridor studies should (a) specify the features that need to be protected through a site-specific analysis of each viewshed; (b) state why it is important to protect those features; (c) where applicable, establish specific mapped boundaries that define the minimum area necessary to protect the identified features; and (d) identify the type of inappropriate development that should be regulated.



Cuesta Ridge – Scenic Highway 101 Corridor east of San Luis Obispo



**TABLE VR-2
CANDIDATE SCENIC CORRIDORS**

Adelaida Road	Highway 101
Avila Beach Drive	Huasna Road from Lopez Drive
Chimney Rock Road	Nacimiento Lake Drive/Interlake Road from Paso Robles to Monterey County
Cypress Mountain Drive from Santa Rosa Creek Road to Chimney Rock Road	Orcutt Road from the San Luis Obispo Planning Area to Lopez Drive
Elkhorn Road/Elkhorn Grade Road in the Carrizo Plain	Palo Prieta Cholame Road/Bitterwater Road/Soda Lake Road from Cholame to the California Valley
Foothill Road from San Luis Obispo city limits to Los Osos Valley Road	Pecho Valley Road from Rodman Drive through Montana de Oro State Park
Hi Mountain Road	Pozo Road between Hi Mountain Road and Highway 58
Highway 41 between Morro Bay and Atascadero	Prefumo Canyon Road/See Canyon Road
Highway 46 East	Price Canyon Road
Highway 46 West	Santa Rosa Creek Road
Highway 58 from the Santa Margarita urban reserve line to the Kern County line	South Bay Boulevard from Santa Ysabel Avenue to Highway 1

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 4.1.2 Scenic corridor: Design Standards**

Establish scenic corridor design standards in conjunction with scenic corridor and highway designations. Regulations should be modeled after the Highway Corridor Design Standards in place in the Land Use Element. Guidelines and standards should require sensitive siting of development and visually effective setbacks. In addition, the guidelines and standards should address siting and building design below ridgetops, access roads, landscaping, building height, signs, lighting, and outdoor advertising. Any regulations should ensure that there would not be undue restrictions on private property or agricultural operations. In addition, design standards for projects subject to discretionary review should balance the protection of scenic resources with protection of agricultural resources and facilities. (AGP30a) Industrial, processing and



similar uses should be located outside of scenic viewsheds as the first priority, or if not feasible, requiring unobtrusive designs. (VP8)

◇ *Implementation Strategy VR 4.1.3 Scenic Corridor: Highway Improvements*

Install, and encourage Caltrans to install special scenic treatments within scenic road and highway rights-of-way. Those treatments may include view-sensitive sign placement, highway directional signs, guardrails and fences, lighting, scenic outlooks, frontage roads, contoured grading, vegetation, and unobtrusive highway structures.



Highway 101 design in scenic corridor

Policy VR 4.2 Balanced Protection

Balance the protection of scenic resources with the protection of biological and agricultural resources that may co-exist within the scenic corridor. (AGP30b1)

Policy VR 4.3 Agricultural Uses in Scenic Corridors

Designation and management of scenic corridors will not interfere with agricultural uses on private lands. (AGP30a)

Policy VR 4.4 Scenic Preservation Collaborative Efforts

Work with property owners to preserve prominent ridgelines and scenic backdrops through open space agreements, contracts, or other appropriate instruments along designated scenic corridors.

Policy VR 4.5 Scenic Corridor Roadway Design

The County should develop policies and standards for each designated scenic corridor that will guide all County and State road and highway development projects. An example of such policies and standards is included in **Appendix 6**.



GOAL

5

VIEWS FROM SCENIC VISTAS AND VISTA POINTS WILL BE PROTECTED.



New development consistent with historical structures in Santa Margarita

Policy VR 5.1 Retain Existing Scenic Access

Encourage Caltrans to maintain existing scenic vista points. Where vista points and turnouts must be eliminated due to bluff erosion, other hazards, or operational needs, they should be replaced in reasonable proximity if feasible.

Policy VR 5.2 Create New Scenic Access

The County and Caltrans, as applicable, should identify, construct, and maintain additional scenic overlooks, turnouts, or vista points along designated scenic corridors. Vista points, overlooks, and turnouts should include parking, support facilities, and interpretive features as appropriate.

Policy VR 5.3 Sale of Public Lands

Seek to assure, through required General Plan conformity reports and the disposal of County-owned lands, that the sale of publicly owned land is consistent with the goals and policies in this Element to protect the county's visual resources.

GOAL

6

A COHESIVE VISUAL CHARACTER WILL BE MAINTAINED IN URBAN AREAS.

Policy VR 6.1 Urban Design

Ensure that new multi-family residential, mixed-use, and commercial or other non-residential development in the urban and village areas is consistent with local character, identity, and sense of place.

◇ *Implementation Strategy VR 6.1.1 Urban Design: Community Design Guidelines*

Revise the Countywide Design Guidelines as needed to address local character, identity, and "sense of place." Consider amending the Land Use Ordinance and Coastal



Zone Land Use Ordinance to incorporate the Guidelines, together with the community design plans, into a consolidated set of design guidelines and standards.

GOAL

7

VIEWS OF THE NIGHT SKY AND ITS CONSTELLATIONS OF STARS WILL BE MAINTAINED.

Policy VR 7.1 Nighttime Light Pollution

Protect the clarity and visibility of the night sky within communities and rural areas, by ensuring that exterior lighting, including streetlight projects, is designed to minimize nighttime light pollution.

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 7.1.1 Night Sky: Review of Exterior Lighting**

Amend the Land Use Ordinance to clarify the content and review of exterior lighting plans and to make other changes as needed to minimize impacts to the night sky from glare and the amount of light.

GOAL

8

VISUAL INTRUSIONS OF SIGNS WILL BE MINIMIZED WITHIN PUBLIC VIEW CORRIDORS.

Policy VR 8.1 Billboards

Continue to prohibit new off-site advertising signs (billboards). The County should initiate programs for billboard removal and support community efforts to buy the rights to current billboard operations. (VP1)

Policy VR 8.2 Informational or Interpretive Signs

Encourage creation of a system of roadside informational signs to meet the legitimate need of motorists for tourist information. These signs should be constructed of materials reflecting the environment and the county's heritage. (VP1)

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 8.1 and 8.2 Billboards and Informational Signs**

Work with property owners to fund and purchase the rights to existing billboards and off-site signs, especially within view of



the Candidate Scenic Corridors listed in **Table VR-2**. Collaborate with Caltrans to develop an unobtrusive yet effective program for informational highway signs. These signs should be constructed of materials that reflect the environment and the county's heritage.

GOAL**9**

THE VISUAL EFFECTS OF UTILITY LINES
WILL BE MINIMIZED.

Policy VR 9.1 Underground Utilities

Encourage all existing areas with overhead lines, particularly the candidate Scenic Corridors listed in **Table VR-2**, to be placed underground through special districts, supplementing existing funding through Rule 20A utility fees. The County Underground Coordinating Committee should give high priority to these critical areas, as well as central business districts and urban corridors. Government agencies should set an example by ensuring that utilities serving public properties are relocated underground as part of the construction or remodeling of public facilities. (VP3)

Policy VR 9.2 Utility Service Lines

Utility companies should prepare long-range corridor plans for service lines in consultation with local organizations and government agencies. New transmission lines that would be visually damaging should be designed to minimize visual effects. In addition, access roads and right-of-way clearing should be kept to the minimum necessary where new installation or repair of existing installations occurs. (VP4)

Policy VR 9.3 Communications Facilities

Locate, design and screen communications facilities, including towers, antennas, and associated equipment and buildings in order to avoid views of them in scenic areas, minimize their appearance and visually blend with the surrounding natural and built environments. Locate such facilities to avoid ridge tops where they would silhouette against the sky as viewed from major public view corridors and locations.



Policy VR 9.4 Co-location of communication facilities

Encourage co-location of communications facilities (one or more companies sharing a site, tower or equipment) when feasible and where it would avoid or minimize adverse visual effects.

◇ **Implementation Strategy VR 9.4.1 Communication Facilities: Amend Land Use Ordinance**

Amend the standards in the Land Use Ordinance and Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance to avoid the adverse visual effects of communications facilities. These standards should include height limitations, setbacks from buildings and property lines, screening and landscaping requirements, and location and design criteria for communication facilities.



Cerro Romauldo – An ancient volcanic peak between San Luis Obispo and Morro Bay

Co-location includes the installation of antennas operated by different entities in close proximity so that use of substantial elements of the facility such as the antenna tower, equipment shelter or fenced enclosure is shared.



Summary of Implementation Strategies

For each implementation strategy described in this chapter, the following table (**Table VR-3**) summarizes the County department or other agency that has primary responsibility for carrying out that strategy. In addition, the table summarizes the priority, estimated year of initiation, and potential source of funding of each strategy. The actual timeframe for implementing the strategies is dependent upon the availability of adequate staff and funding.

TABLE VR-3
VISUAL RESOURCES IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation Strategy	Responsible Department or Agency ¹	Priority	Timeframe to Start	Potential Funding Sources ²
IS VR 1.1.1 Identify and Designate Scenic Landmarks and Landscapes	PB	High	2011	DB
IS VR 1.1.2 Amend Plans and Ordinances	PB	Medium	2011	DB
IS VR 2.3.1 Amend Countywide Design Guidelines	PB	High	2011	DB
IS VR 3.1.1 Community Separator: Amend the Land Use Element and Ordinance	PB	High	2010	DB
IS VR 3.1.2 Community Separator: Frontage Roads	PB	Medium	2012	DB
IS VR 3.1.3 Community Separator: TDC	PB	Medium	2011	DB
IS VR 4.1.1 Scenic Corridors: Work Plan	PB	Medium	2012	DB
IS VR 4.1.2 Scenic Corridors: Standards	PB	Medium	2012	DB
IS VR 4.1.3 Scenic Corridors: Highway Improvements	PB	Medium	2012	DB, grant



Implementation Strategy	Responsible Department or Agency ¹	Priority	Timeframe to Start	Potential Funding Sources ²
IS VR 6.1.1 Community Design Guidelines: Urban Design	PB	Medium	2013	DB
IS VR 7.1.1 Night Sky: Review of Exterior Lighting	PB	Medium	2011	DB
IS VR 8.1 and 8.2 Billboards and Informational Signs	PB	Medium	2011	DB
IS VR 9.4.1 Communication Facilities: Amend Land Use Ordinance	PB	High	2010	DB

1 Department abbreviations:
 Caltrans= California Department of Transportation
 PB= County Department of Planning and Building
 PW= County Department of Public Works

2 Funding source abbreviations:
 GF = General Fund
 DB = Planning and Building Department Budget

Source: Department of Planning and Building, March 2009.

